

Disability and Climate Change: Preparing for the Future

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Original posts from the New Earth Disability blog

www.WID.org/NED

September 15, 2014

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In my past couple posts, I summarized the articles and papers that I could find online that covered the intersection of climate change and disability. In general, they analyzed climate change policy, advocated for changes that recognize its impacts on people with disabilities (PWD) and prepare accordingly. The big problem, though, is that none of them pointed out any significant inclusion of PWD in climate change policy. There's very little in IPCC reports or elsewhere that differentiates us from other "vulnerable groups - such as women, children, the elderly, and the disabled" and almost no details about specific impacts. For example, there's nothing that addresses the accessibility of disaster prep (accessible transit, accessible shelters, sustaining medical services, etc.), accessible disaster relief and recovery (DRR), or including community & medical support during & after climate change-related migration. And since nobody points out the problem, high-level policymakers don't direct anybody else to shape policy in a way that addresses PWD's needs.

Now, this doesn't mean that things like DRR don't address the needs of PWD. Nationwide, local officials have made disaster plans with accessible emergency transit, emergency shelters with medical facilities that accommodate PWD, etc. But those types of plans are by no means comprehensive, and certainly not ubiquitous nationwide (and definitely not worldwide). They also generally aren't framed within the context of climate change, and sometimes aren't even for climate change-related events. For example, some of the more progressive emergency plans are for earthquakes in California, which entail entirely different impacts and needs than do, say, hurricanes.

Without direction from high-level experts and policymakers (i.e. the IPCC), effective climate change prep probably won't happen. And because of the multifaceted nature of climate change impacts (stronger storms, mass migrations, property destruction, famine, etc.), there need to be widespread and interconnected plans. Including PWD in all of these will take a ton of effort, and there absolutely has to be direction from the top for anything to happen. This is especially important because climate change planning inherently has to be interconnected - and policymakers, officials, analysts, and activists need to be on the same page. They already are in some respects, such as impacts in different geographies and concerns about poor groups, but PWD simply aren't included in the discussion.

So, what's the next step? In my opinion, analysts and policymakers at the international level - such as the IPCC and UN - need to be educated about the widespread lack of focus on PWD in climate change policy. Then, advocates need to point out the importance of addressing disability-specific impacts and needs. We need to show them how many PWD there are worldwide (15%, by some estimates), and different characteristics and needs of those populations - both between countries/regions and between different types of disabilities. We need to identify the different impacts on, and needs of, those populations under each of climate change's "symptoms" (or push for research to do so). Finally, we need to work with all stakeholders, including disability experts and organizations, to develop

comprehensive plans for including PWD in climate change-related prep, and start implementing those plans immediately.

The last part will undoubtedly be the hardest. It will require advocacy from disability experts and NGOs, as well as human rights organizations in general. Networking between experts at many levels will be key. Climate change experts, disability experts, NGOs, state and national officials, and ground-level officials will all have to work together to incorporate disability into climate change plans - and act on them as soon as possible. And it's urgent that we get the ball rolling now.